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BOOK Section

# How to Catch a Liar

**TELLING LIES**
*Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage.*
*By Paul Ekman.*
*Illustrated. 320 pp. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. $17.95.*

By Carol Z. Malatesta

MAN is the thinking animal and by virtue of speech an inventing, story-making and lying animal. While lower animals can deceive and mislead through camouflage and similar devices, as far as we know only humans can consciously and deliberately lie.

Paul Ekman's "Telling Lies" is about deception and lie catching. It distills 15 years of scientific study of nonverbal communication and the clues to deception. Mr. Ekman, a pioneer in emotions research and nonverbal communication, is a professor of psychology at the University of California, San Francisco. His interest in using nonverbal clues to detect lying was originally prompted by clinical concerns — specifically, an interest in understanding how patients can deceive their therapists about the true state of their feelings and intentions, sometimes with grave consequences (as in the case of a patient who convinced her therapist to give her a weekend pass to visit her family, all the while intending to use the opportunity to commit suicide). As his experiments on lying proceeded and were reported in scientific journals, Mr. Ekman found himself sought for consultation by Government agencies that were interested in applying them to intelligence and counterintelligence, as well as by people selecting and training police officers and business people screening applicants for sensitive positions.

Mr. Ekman was not pleased by this kind of interest. He knew that findings in the field were less than clear and complete, and he was chary of a blind interpretation and application of the results of laboratory studies. He urged caution and discretionary use. Unhappily, his advice often went unheeded. He feared that nonverbal "experts," consulted secretly and unchallenged by public and scientific scrutiny, might supply incomplete or erroneous information. His apprehension about potential abuses led him to write this fascinating account, an accurate, intelligent, informative and thoughtful work that is accessible to the layman and scientist alike. Mr. Ekman describes why and how people lie, why some are successful and others not, how some people are skillful at detecting deception, while others are not, and which clues to deception are reliable and which not. He draws his data from scientific studies and his illustrative material from politics, literature and everyday life.

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Several of his examples involve the events leading up to World War II. A number of fateful deceptions were attempted during this time, and many were successful. Hitler, for example, in a face-to-face encounter with the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, was able to convince him that he was not planning war, and he succeeded in concealing the fact that the German Army was already mobilized to attack Czechoslavakia. Why and how was Chamberlain duped? According to Mr. Ekman, Hitler's success stemmed from his ability to mask his real feelings and intentions, as well as from Chamberlain's lack of access (because of inadequacies of translation) to some of the clues to deception, his failure to accurately interpret those that were available to him and his desire to believe Hitler.

A liar may betray himself through linguistic mistakes, but the main sources of betrayal are the emotions. Emotion reveals itself, sometimes in contradictory ways, in the voice, body and face. Deceptions typically involve trying to conceal or falsify feelings that are inappropriate or not socially sanctioned or trying to cover up the fear, guilt and distress that may be provoked when one attempts to get away with a lie. When a person lies and has an emotional investment in the situation, a perfect performance is hard to carry off. Nonverbal clues to deception leak out. What is perhaps surprising is that few people make use of the leakage clues available to them and thus fail to detect the liar. The problem stems from both the adroitness of the deceiver and the naïveté of the victim.

Research involving fine-grained analysis of subtle nonverbal clues has been able to isolate and identify signs that index lying. But the signs are not infallible, nor are the people who would use them. Learning capacity, motivational state and flexibility of intelligence are some of the factors to be taken into account in determining which people might profit from a training program in the detection of deceit. Motivation and ability to learn have to be considerable.

For instance, think about the smile, usually an indication of happiness or pleasure. It turns out there are 18 different types of authentic, or "felt," smiles in Mr. Ekman's system — the contemptuous smile, the shy smile, the fearful smile and so on. (Mr. Ekman has even classified the Mona Lisa's smile as a flirtatious one, based on the observation that she is facing one way but glancing sideways at the object of her interest.) This is not to mention the host of false smiles, some of which can be detected by asymmetry, anomalies in timing and lack of involvement of the muscles around the eyes. Can people be trained to detect and use these dozens of subtle and sometimes conflicting cues? Research indicates that trained observers can make such distinctions among types of expressions on videotape. Whether their training will allow them to make the same distinctions with people they confront in ordinary situations is uncertain.

Mr. Ekman treats the issue of intelligent use of deception clues with the seriousness it deserves. His book makes it clear that the science of deceit detection is not yet perfect or even close to perfection — there is a good deal of latitude for error and misjudgment. Mr. Ekman does his best to alert us to mistakes and teach us ways of avoiding them. But a question that arises in reading this book concerns future use. As science progresses, we may very well see the day when something near perfection is achieved. Then we will be faced with the question of whether or not we want to become skilled deception detectors.

WHAT would our social life be like if everyone had the ability to detect others' true sentiments and intentions with unerring accuracy? People learn to mask or conceal their emotions for very legitimate reasons — to protect their privacy, to prevent others from gaining an unfair advantage over them and, more altruistically, to protect other people's feelings. In the laboratory where I work, we have found that training in the ability to control the musculature of the face during emotional states begins as early as infancy. Well before adolescence, a child will have gained a good measure of control over facial musculature and will have discerned that others have an equal or even a superior capacity to dissimulate. It is common for young children to wish for the supernatural ability to read the thoughts and feelings of

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others (and to hope that the power isn't reciprocal). Such a desire does not persist into adulthood. Human dignity calls for the preservation of private life, and if that means accepting the fact that others may occasionally be less than truthful with us, so be it.

Mr. Ekman is not insensitive to the political and social implications of making the information in this book available to the public. It could be used for malevolent purposes. Might it not be of more aid to the conniving head of state, the duplicitous spouse or the terrorist in training than to those who would interfere with the plans of such people? Mr. Ekman doubts this. As he perceives it, statesmen, politicians, people in business, parents and spouses will act on their beliefs about how to get away with lying or how to go about detecting a liar — whether their beliefs are accurate and cautious or not. In Mr. Ekman's view, it is better that people act on fact rather than hunches and intuition. In any case, he suggests that his book should help lie catchers more than liars, since a manual for liars would not make sense — natural liars don't need a manual, and the rest of us don't have the talent to benefit from one. Then again, he could be lying. □



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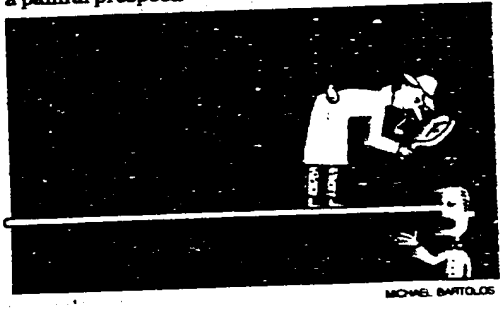
## A World of Deception

It is not just altruism or respect for privacy that should give pause to the relentless lie catcher. . . . I believe it worth noting that *sometimes* lie catching violates a relationship, betrays trust, steals information that was not, for good reason, given. The lie catcher should realize that detecting clues to deceit is a presumption — it takes without permission, despite the other person's wishes. . . .

Consider what life would be like if everyone could lie perfectly or if no one could lie at all. I have thought about this most in regard to lies about emotions, since those are the hardest lies. . . . If we could never know how someone really felt, and if we knew that we couldn't know, life would be more tenuous. Certain in the knowledge that every show of emotion might be a mere display put on to please, manipulate, or mislead, individuals would be more adrift, attachments less firm. . . . We lead

our lives believing that there is a core of emotional truth, that most people can't or won't mislead us about how they feel. If treachery was as easy with emotions as with ideas, if expressions and gestures could be disguised and falsified as readily as words, our emotional lives would be impoverished and more guarded than they are.

And if we could never lie, if a smile was reliable, never absent when pleasure was felt, and never present without pleasure, life would be rougher than it is, many relationships harder to maintain. Politeness, attempts to smooth matters over, to conceal feelings one wished one didn't feel — all that would be gone. There would be no way not to be known, no opportunity to sulk or lick one's wounds except alone. Consider having as a friend, co-worker, or lover a person who in terms of emotional control and disguise was like a three-month-old infant, yet in all other respects — intelligence, skills, and so on — was fully able as any adult. It is a painful prospect. —*From "Telling Lies."*



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